

HUMAN SEXUALITY (1993)

Standing Order 236 directs that “all matters concerning the faith or order of the Church presented to the Conference by other bodies shall be scrutinised by the (Faith and Order) Committee”. The Committee has given careful consideration to the report of the Commission on Human Sexuality, and offers the following observations to members of the Conference. No resolutions accompany this section of the Committee’s report.

The Faith and Order Committee is aware that human sexuality is a subject on which strong and sometimes conflicting views are held among the Methodist people. The Committee believes that it can best assist the Conference in seeking to preserve the unity and fellowship of the Church as it continues in the search for truth and justice in these matters by offering a number of comments on major issues rather than a detailed critique of the 1990 report.

1. In a Christian context, disagreements about sexual matters are often significantly linked to divergent views about the ways in which the Bible should be understood and interpreted. We should be clear that the issue here is the way in which we use the Bible in making ethical decisions. The 1990 report properly seeks to address what it means to use Scripture in such a report and does not claim that the Bible can supply direct answers to every question which people in our day may ask. In the judgment of the Faith and Order Committee the report accepts the authority of Scripture and uses the Bible responsibly.

2. We have now begun to move away from a long history of regarding sexuality as inherently sinful and we have begun to affirm it as a gift of God. We cannot divorce ourselves from the culture of the past or the present, but we can look at it critically and weigh it in the balance against what we discern as the Gospel. The sensitive and difficult nature of the task of seeing sexual love as sharing in the divine act of loving is evident in the report.

3. As we try to determine how the Methodist commitment to Scriptural holiness is to be related to questions of sexuality, we have to wrestle with the question of how to interpret Scripture for today. Wesley’s reading of the Scriptures was of his time and, in cultural terms, so were his attitudes to sexuality. For him, the pursuit of holiness was paramount : even divisions of opinion over doctrine and discipline were secondary. In moral matters he did, however, acknowledge areas of doubt (plays and cards were not for him in later life but might be allowable for others). As the Report makes plain, our knowledge of the causes of sexual orientation is limited. Faced as we are with the need to deepen our understanding of sexuality which balances affirmation of God’s creation with proper restraint about its abuse, we would be well-advised not to claim greater wisdom than we have nor to seek to impose our own strongly held views on others whose views, different from our own, are held as strongly.

4. As the Conference seeks to come to a mind about ways forward in the light of the report, the Faith and Order Committee appeals to the Church to seek to discern (through Scripture, tradition, reason and experience) how the Spirit is leading us, recognizing that, not for the first time, the people of God are called to live with the pain of their differences.

(Agenda 1993, pp.249-250)